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2018

Wilberta Naden Pickett

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Illinois Wesleyan University

Recommended Citation

Pickett '50, Wilberta Naden, "Wilberta Naden Pickett" (2018). *All oral histories*. 142.
https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/oral_hist/142

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My Wesleyan Legacy, Part 1 -- Memories of My First Piano Teacher
LUETTA MAE ("Peggy") ZAHN CUMMINS MOORE, IWU, BA, Music Ed., 1932
Recorded September 10th, 2018

I am **Wilberta Naden Pickett**, a proud graduate of IWU, BMusic 1950, (yes, that makes me 90) where I majored in piano, studying with **Lucy Brandicon**, and minored in organ with **Lillian Mecherle McCord**, and voice with **Maxine (Mickey) Lebkuecher Drexler** and **Gretchen Van Roy**. From there I went on to earn a Master' of Sacred Music at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City. I now live at Longwood at Oakmont, a retirement community in suburban Pittsburgh, PA not far from where we lived before for 44 years, raising our children in the Fox Chapel School district.

I want to tell you how much Wesleyan's School of Music alums and professors, who throughout my young life taught me well and who influenced my choice of college and my life work. It all started with my first piano teacher, **Luetta Mae (Peggy) Zahn Cummins Moore** who graduated from IWU in 1932 with a BA in Music Education. As a child I lived in St. Anne, IL where the public school music teachers there and in the surrounding communities were IWU grads. It was "**Mrs. Cummins**," whom I loved dearly, who really launched my music education that led to a career as a church organist/choir director.

Peggy Cummins, fresh out of college, came to town when I was four years old. She told my mother that she had worked with young children there and would like to take me as a student. Why? I think it was because she picked up my joyful response to the rehearsals in our home of the male quartet in which my father and her husband sang. My father was a young high school teacher of math and science in the new St. Anne High School. Mrs. Cummins' husband, **Robert W., "Bob" Cummins**, another Wesleyan grad, class of 1929, also came to St. Anne in 1932 to be the band director and to teach history and English. Being deep into the Great Depression, the quartet's weekly rehearsals in each other's homes was preceded by a potluck supper, probably the best meal of the week.

Mrs. Cummins came to our home every week for several years for my 50 cent lesson, playing musical games with me and teaching me to read music and play the piano. I remember playing and singing "Ring Around a Rosie, pocket full of posies....." - how much fun it was and how softly and gently she laughed with me as we tumbled onto the floor together.

I remember my first finger exercises - resting my forearm on the closed keyboard and raising my fingers up and down, one at a time, reciting rhythmically, "This little chick pecks a grain of corn, pecks and pecks from early morn." (Early rap?) I had a Matthews First Piano Book, supplemented with a variety of easy pieces from the Etude magazine. One I still remember is, "The moo cow moo, gives milk to me; I don't drink coffee and I don't drink tea; for milk is better for children like me. Moo, cow, moo." The first hymn I remember learning was "My Jesus, I Love Thee." It was easy, in the key of F. I remember playing it for the male quartet and their wives at our house. How proud I felt.

My mother used to laugh at me because as a child I smelled everything - new shoes, newly sharpened pencils, new fabric for homemade dresses my mother sewed, new story books, the smell of the brand new wood in the handball court in the new high school where I sometimes watched my dad and Mr. Cummins enjoy a game. I remember how good Mrs. Cummins smelled when she came to my lessons. For years I wondered just what it was until a few years ago I noticed that a friend was wearing a fragrance that said, "dear Mrs. Cummins" to me. I asked her, "What are you wearing that smells so good?" It was Avon hand cream.

Mrs. Cummins told my mother I had perfect pitch - I didn't know there was anything special about remembering musical pitches. However, our piano was an old Hamilton upright and tuned a half step low so I later had to relearn the pitches. At any rate, that seemed very ordinary to me. It did make an attitude problem for me later in college when I had to take solfege. It seemed so unnecessary to have to translate notes into a syllable in order to sight read when I could sight read the notes by themselves.

It wasn't long till the Cummins had two children, the late Margaret Toth ("little Peggy"), of Spartanburg, SC, and the late Robert, Jr., "Bobby," IWU, BME 1956, of Fairbury, IL. They both were recipients of hand me down clothes from my brother and me - remember these were Depression Days. Young Bob and his father were the only father and son who both sang in the Apollo Quartet at IWU.

The Cummins lived down the street from us in St. Anne. I remember Mrs. Cummins telling my mother that when as a toddler Bobby wasn't supposed to cross the street, still he had strayed across. When he was scolded for not minding, he said in defense of his three or four year old self, "I couldn't help it. The wind pushed me across." My parents got a good laugh out of that.

When I was a student at Wesleyan, Bob and Peggy Cummins, then living in Fairbury, called to invite me and then came to pick me up to spend an overnight on Saturday, and then to church on Sunday. After a welcomed home cooked dinner, Bob asked me if my parents allowed me to go to the movies on Sunday. Times were different then! When I assured him our family often went to movies on Sundays, they took me to see the 1937 film, "The Voice of the Turtle," the title taken from the book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible, used for a sweet love story starring Ronald Reagan, Eleanor Parker, Eve Arden and Wayne Morris.

When John and I had been married just a few years, I had a telephone call from Mr. Cummins. I knew who it was the minute I heard his deep, resonant voice and laugh over the telephone. I was thrilled to hear it. He told me they were coming through our town and asked if they could stop to see us. It was so good to see them after all those years and to be remembered by mentors from my childhood.

Many years ago when John and I attended one of my class reunions at Wesleyan, we arranged to stop to visit Peggy then living in Forrest, IL. Bob had died much too early in 1958. She urged us to plan to come in time for supper. During our visit she told me that my mother often sent a loaf of homemade bread in lieu of the 50 cent piano lesson payment.

Five years after that visit, we attended another Wesleyan class reunion, and again visited Peggy when she filled us in on her children and grandchildren. She told me that for many years she had been the organist at the St. Anne Presbyterian Church which I attended as a child. Now still living in Forrest, she was volunteering at the public library, reading to people with failing sight. She had such a generous, giving spirit.

The last time I saw her was when she was in the Fair Haven Nursing Home in Fairbury, and quite frail. Her son Bob and his wife Mary advised us not to stay very long. Beyond her frailty though, I could see the sweet, loving, very pretty young piano teacher who played with me and smelled so good. I owed her so much in getting me started down the road to my life in music. I truly loved her.

Luetta Mae Zahn, IWU class of 1932, my "**Mrs. Cummins**," it's been 86 years since she started me on the path of a wonderful life combining raising a family while being an organist and choir director. I owe Peggy Cummins a deep debt of gratitude; and Illinois Wesleyan's Music School an equally deep debt for educating her and for educating me.

MY WESLEYAN LEGACY, PART 2

When I was nine years old my family moved a few miles away to Grant Park, IL where again the public school music teachers were IWU grads, the first of whom was **Mary Allison Badger Seaman Coulter, IWU, BMusic, 1937**, who took a great interest in me. She gave me books to read, biographies of great musicians, gave me music projects like orchestration lessons, gave me violin lessons, even gave me her own beginning violin. She invited me to spend a weekend with her, taking me for a long musical treat day in Chicago. We visited the Lyon & Healy Harp Company and a violin maker. Then she treated me to dinner at the Palmer House where I first tasted lamb and whose strawberry short cake was not at all like my mother's sweet biscuit shortbread lathered in crushed, sweetened strawberries topped with real whipped cream. This famous restaurant had the nerve to call strawberry shortcake a concoction of a yellow cake with white icing, topped with one strawberry. Then she redeemed that dessert with a second one: she took me to hear the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Even sitting at the top of the steep balcony, my first time to hear any symphony was a great thrill!

When I graduated from Wendell Willkie High School in Elwood, Indiana in 1946, of course I would continue music studies - but where? In those days students didn't visit multiple campuses, we just decided where we wanted to study and then applied there. My choice was either Indiana University's "world's largest music school" which would be affordable for an in state student, or Illinois Wesleyan, a smaller more intimate school whose excellence I had profited from, but too expensive. Then I learned about Methodist scholarships and applied. Miracle of miracles, I was awarded one. This covered full Music School tuition of \$400 every year for four years. I was, and I am very grateful to the Methodist Church for that wonderful gift that made my college education possible. I had several jobs that helped pay for room and board: I accompanied in the Music School (35 cents/hour), I baby sat for faculty, and cleaned and cooked for various faculty and towns' folk. When I was a junior, rooming with Nadine Callahan Simpson in DeMotte Lodge, we had a hot plate in our room and used the window sill as a frig for our milk and juice. We cooked our own dinner every evening, and on Wednesdays invited friends to eat with us and asked them to bring dessert, our only once a week treat.

When I entered Wesleyan's music school I wasn't sure how I should focus my studies, so I registered as a piano performance major. Since I enjoyed accompanying in studios and for choruses, I thought being a professional accompanist would be my goal. However, the director of the School of Music, **Dr. Kenneth Cuthbert** insisted that all women music students should prepare for music education so they could be sure to get a job upon graduation. So I obediently took education courses, yet at the same time I took elective courses that might help prepare me for a possible career in Music Therapy. I soon dropped that option after spending six weeks one summer with an AFS team from IWU who worked at the State School and Colony for Feeble Minded at Lincoln, IL. I was not emotionally mature enough to deal with people in that environment.

I will digress from my music memories to share a couple of memories of racism in Bloomington/Normal that affected campus life. When I was about to return to campus for my junior year, I received a letter from Ann Meierhofer, Dean of Women, addressed to all the women who would be living in DeMotte Lodge that year. It informed us that two "Negro" women from Chicago were assigned to the dorm and that if that bothered us, we could ask to live somewhere else. None of us did, and as it turned out, we all got along very well, one of them even became one of my three roommates my senior year. However, at the end of our junior year, all of the women in the dorm decided to celebrate the end of the year by going out to dinner together at a restaurant downtown. So we made a reservation for six o'clock, and arrived promptly, all dressed up. We sat down and waited to be called to the table. We waited and waited and waited. After about an hour, our house president and house mother sought out the manager, asking why it was taking us so long to be seated. We were told they could not serve us because we had two Negroes with us. It was explained that we were from Wesleyan and we all lived together and expected to eat together. With some disdain we were allowed to stay this time but admonished never to do that again!

That was the spring of 1949. Before that, though, students from the Wesley Foundation at ISNU and Christian groups from IWU, together staged sit-ins at Steak 'N Shake because they were not serving Negroes. That was long before Martin Luther King's non-violent protests. I was proud that we took a stand, but don't know how long it took for eating places in town to serve everybody.

Back to my music education. When I graduated from Wesleyan I was offered a full scholarship to pursue a Master's degree in piano performance there, but I turned it down because two of my professors - **Lillian Mecherle McCord**, my organ teacher who was the daughter of the founder of State Farm Insurance Co., and **Lloyd Pfautsch**, professor of voice and director of the University Choir and the Collegiate Choir, both graduates of Union Theological Seminary's School of Sacred Music, urged me to enroll there for a Master's of Sacred Music degree. Mrs. McCord, always so encouraging, said I was made to be an organist. Mr. Pfautsch, for whom I accompanied in his voice studio and choirs, affirmed that skill. They both said that because I had a good background in organ and choral work and had been so involved in the religious life on campus they thought music ministry was where my talents could be realized best.

I demurred knowing I couldn't afford it. When they said I should at least apply, I told Mrs. McCord I didn't even have enough money (\$15!) for the application fee, let alone pay the tuition and room and board. Immediately Mrs. McCord said, "I'll pay your application fee. Besides there will be good financial aid at Union and you'll get a student church job." So I applied and was accepted. It was absolutely the right path for me.

When I was accepted at Union, I was advised that the dorms were all filled. Wesleyan to my rescue! My IWU voice teacher, **Gretchen VanRoy**, a graduate of Teachers College at Columbia University, gave me the name of the manager of an apartment building on nearby Riverside Drive where she had lived. I landed a room, the "maid's room with a private bath" (very small) in a former elegant large apartment for \$6 a week! I was able to move into a Union dorm for the second semester.

At Union Theological Seminary, I was pleased to find **Dr. Robert S. Baker**, B.Music, IWU, 1938, professor of organ there and organist/choirmaster at First Presbyterian Church in Brookly Hts., NY, and at Temple Emanu-El on Fifth Avenue, New York City. He was very well known nationally as an organist, teacher and recitalist whom I previously had heard play annual organ recitals at Illinois Wesleyan. Bob was revered as an outstanding alum, of course, and his recitals always exciting and superb. He liked to come back to play at Wesleyan and also visit his family nearby.

I'll never forget one of his recitals there. He entered Presser Hall and sat down at the console of the organ, positioned at the time just beneath the stage, and as far left as possible. He started the recital with a Bach Prelude and Fugue - I don't remember which one, but about after four measures he came to a complete stop. After a brief pause, he started over again. It happened again - 4 more measures and quit. I think this happened a third time. Then he got up off the bench, turned to the waiting audience, and with a big grin on his face, announced, "Ladies and Gentlemen: I was always afraid this might happen some day. I forgot. So let's give it another go." He climbed back onto the bench and plowed right through it. Such gracious humanity. Afterwards I had the reassurance that even the best of the lot have occasional glitches. It's no disgrace. Just get yourself up, admit it, and go on.

Dr. Baker's wife was **Mary Depler**, B.Music, IWU, 1938 whom he met during piano auditions when they entered Wesleyan. Illinois Wesleyan had top-notch music teachers and produced top-notch musicians. Although I did not study organ with Dr. Baker at Union, he and Mary were always cordial to me, a fellow Wesleyanite.

A year later when I was married in between my two years of graduate school and in between John's two years in the USArmy serving at Ft. Lee, Virginia, Mrs. McCord played for our wedding, and Lloyd Pfautsch sang, both driving together almost two hundred miles from Bloomington to my home church, First Methodist in Elwood, IN. I felt greatly honored that they would do that for us.

I first served a church as Organist/Choir Director in Richmond, IN starting in 1952. While there I became the Dean of the Whitewater Valley Chapter of the American Guild of Organists. In 1957 I presented a program on "Music for the Christian Wedding" (the title of my master's degree thesis) at the regional convention of the AGO in Milwaukee. From 1960 I served churches in suburban Cleveland, OH, and from 1965 in suburban Pittsburgh, PA. After our children were through college, I resigned from church employment to enjoy free weekends. I am still active in the Pittsburgh chapter of the American Guild of Organists, and was a founding member and one time

president of the Pittsburgh chapter of the Presbyterian Association of Musicians. I served twelve years on Pittsburgh Presbytery's Worship Committee, half the time being the chair person.

My husband, John, is a graduate of Indiana University in that other Bloomington, but we never went to any school together. Our mutual piano teacher from Kokomo introduced us when we were 14 years old and assigned us to play the big finale number on the big spring recital, a two piano duo, "Danse Macabre," by Saint-Saens, which we say has become our "Dance of Life." An accounting major in college, he was still a good musician. Any church that hired me got a bonus - a tenor who could read music and stay in tune.

John was ahead of his time. When I was looking for a job after grad school, he advised me to take a job wherever I could find it. He could get an accounting job anywhere, he would follow me. When the children came along while I was in my first church job, he gladly took care of them on Sunday so I was free to do my thing. He retired from Westinghouse Electric Corporation in 1991 where he was Director, Computer Systems Acquisition. Since 2009 we have been living at Longwood at Oakmont, a retirement community where I have served on and chaired the Music Events Committee and play the piano for many events. We still sing in the choir at Fox Chapel Presbyterian Church and are glad to be in good health and to have each other at age ninety after sixty-seven years together.

John did visit me on campus during my student days, and always accompanied me to attend class reunions. The last one was memorable - it was in 2000, my 50th, and the occasion of dedicating the Sesquicentennial Gate with the four old classic columns from the Hedding College set atop the half walls. These columns had lain in a farm field owned by a Mr. Bloomer all these years till the current descendants decided to donate them to Wesleyan. Attending the dedication ceremony were many dignitaries: the mayor and the state governor among others, plus a visiting couple from Bromsgrove, England who were related to the donors. Owen Vigeon was a retired Anglican priest and his wife, Sally Bloomer Vigeon, was the daughter of the Bishop of Carlisle. Sally V. was a distant cousin of the farmer named Bloomer, whose ancestors had come to America from Ireland at the time of the potato famine. All of the dignitaries were introduced to the crowd sitting on the lawn. Afterwards, the crowd dispersed and we noticed the Vigeons were left standing alone. We went over to greet them and soon found we had many interests in common - he wrote poetry and music, played the flute, and like John was a train fan - not model trains, but the steam trains. We exchanged email addresses which led to a long lasting treasured friendship with both of us visiting each other across the pond. Sadly Sally died last year, but we treasured this friendship that evolved from a chance encounter on the Wesleyan campus.

You can tell that Wesleyan has been a blessing to me all my life - before, during and after my four years on campus. I feel blessed to have had my God given musical talents nourished from the beginning and through the years by Wesleyan alums and professors. They laid the foundation for what became a most fulfilling career in church music along with being a mother of five children. Music has enriched the lives of everyone in our family, which now includes thirteen grand children and ten (and a half) great grandchildren, thanks to the early and continuing education I received from Wesleyanites. Thank you, Dean Cuthbert, Mrs. Cummins, Mrs. Seaman, Mrs. McCord, Mr. Pfautsch, Mrs. Drexler, Miss VanRoy, and Thank You, Illinois Wesleyan. *"College days are come and gone, still the Spirit lingers on....."*

Wilberta Naden Pickett

Bachelor of Music, IWU, 1950

Master of Sacred Music, Union Theological Seminary, 1952

Choir Master degree, American Guild of Organists, 1956

Certified Church Musician, Presbyterian Association of Musicians, 1978